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TAGS: PREL PGOV KDEM NI
SUBJECT: NIGERIA; A VISIT TO THE SOUTHEAST - PART 1: ABIA

Classified By: CONSUL GENERAL ROBYN HINSON-JONES FOR REASONS 1.5 (B) AN

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¶11. (C) Summary. Orji Kalu, dubbed the "Action Governor" by President Obasanjo for his aggressive style and ability to get programs and projects going in Abia state, recently won a year-long administrative and political tussle with his disgruntled Deputy Governor and half the State legislators. Kalu, a young, rising star of the Peoples Democratic Party (PDP) was recently tapped to be the party's gubernatorial candidate again, and with a pledge of support from the President, he seems set to win another four-year term. End Summary.

Background: Political Family Feud

¶12. (C) The political wrangling in Abia State that started in 2001 arose from an attempt by two rival groups within the Abia Peoples Democratic Party (PDP) to hijack the party machinery. One of the two groups is led by the current Governor, Orji Kalu. The other group, sometimes referred to as the "Abuja Group," consists of Abia State politicians who also hold important federal appointments, such as Transport Minister Ojo Madueke, PDP National Secretary, Vincent Ogbulafor, and Niger Delta Development

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Commission (NDDC) Chairman, Onyema Ugochukwu. This group made moves to try to weaken the popularity and influence of Governor Kalu, an Igbo of the Bende clan. Deputy Governor ¶1H. Enyi Abaribe, an Igbo of the Ukwu Ngwa clan, deserted the Kalu camp and teamed up with the Abuja Group, apparently hoping for support from them should he challenge his old boss for the governorship.

¶13. (C) Using Port Harcourt in Rivers State as the hub for the visit to Abia State, ConOffs traveled by car to Umuahia, Abia's capital, for a courtesy and orientation visit with officials there. T. A. Orji, the Chief of Staff of the Governor, met with us because the Governor and various senior State and PDP officials had been called to Abuja by the party's National Executive Committee for a "reconciliation" meeting. Orji spent the first half hour of the meeting being the archetypal "spin doctor" and public relations frontman for Kalu. He proudly enumerated the Governor's achievements during the past three and a half years and said that his (Orji's) book on the achievements, "Unbroken Covenants," was due in bookstores by Christmas.

Birth of the Dream

¶14. (C) Orji said that as a young and very successful businessman in 1994, Kalu had had "a dream" about the future of Abia State while sitting in a "go slow" (traffic gridlock) one day. Since his election, according to Orji, Kalu had focused on his dream of eradicating poverty in Abia State by promoting the re-development of agriculture with a "back to the soil" program featuring cultivation of rubber plants, education and modern skills training through a "work to learn" program for high school drop-outs, and small business programs for women. "This administration is insuring that our people get at least three meals per day," he boasted. He quickly added that the Kalu administration is very "gender sensitive": there are three senior, female appointees in the State government--the Minister for Rural Development, the Minister for Women and Youth Affairs, and the State Solicitor General. The State government has also initiated and funded special loan programs for women, as well as increased funding for girls' education. Orji said Kalu has definitely lived up to the title, "the Action Governor," bestowed on him early in his tenure by President Olusegun Obasanjo owing to his youthful, energetic, and aggressive pursuit of programs for Abia State.

15. (C) Orji's face set in grim lines when the talk turned to the rift between Governor Kalu and his Deputy, H. Enyi Abaribe. Orji related a rambling story about how Kalu and Abaribe had met by accident at a business meeting. Kalu was so impressed by Abaribe that he immediately asked the politically uninitiated Abaribe to join his administration and subsequently appointed him Deputy Governor. Orji dismissed with an impatient wave of his hand any possibility that Abaribe would challenge Kalu for the top spot in Abia, and declared that Kalu will run "unopposed." He continued saying that Abaribe is just a "sweet talker" whose record was sullied by allegations of graft, loan fraud and theft of government funds. He dubbed Abaribe and his supporters "the Taliban" and predicted they would be as soundly defeated as were the Taliban in Afghanistan.

16. (C) In a separate conversation, Sir I. K. Daniel, Special Assistant (Political) to Governor Kalu, told us on our visit to Abia in November that a party primary held the previous week had failed to unseat the Deputy Governor and had further aggravated the crisis. The split within the PDP in Abia extended to the State House of Assembly as well as the PDP Executive Committee. "The people feel cheated after this primary," he said, "and we are expecting protest petitions to be filed after primary results are announced from Abuja. A reconciliatory attempt by the National Assembly on the day of ConOff's visit, and a previous move by the PDP National Executive, only temporarily succeeded in reconciling the warring factions.

The "Taliban"

17. (C) Abaribe and his supporters, all unpaid for the preceding eighteen months, were hunkered down holding siege at the State Assembly building at the time of ConOff's visit. (Kalu's supporters have moved into offices across from the Governor's office at Government House.) ConOffs waited at the gate to the Assembly grounds while armed guards and State Security Service men conferred with the Deputy Governor; and finally, with the additional efforts of ConGen Political Specialist, persuaded him to tell us his side of the story. ConOffs managed to meet with the Deputy Governor just minutes before he left for Abuja for the "reconciliation" meeting. Abaribe was even more grim-faced and squint-eyed than Orji when discussing his rival, Governor Kalu.

18. (C) Abaribe even had a list of complaints about the administration including mismanagement of funds and failure to provide basic services. He said it was the "Action Governor's" fault that State finances were in such a disastrous condition. The Governor had been overly ambitious and had started too many projects never to finish any of them. He criticized Kalu's plans to increase tax revenues, saying "We must enhance other sources of revenue and distribute the fruits of our democracy before we can increase the tax burden." The Governor has not done anything positive on this issue, according to Abaribe. The State suffers from an unemployment rate of 60 percent. "These people can't pay taxes if they don't have income," he pointed out. "Even the 20 percent in this State who do pay are underpaying." He went on to add that Abians are "disgusted with bad leaders and government corruption" and will not pay taxes to a government that is accountable to no one.

19. (C) On his decision whether or not to oppose Kalu for the 2003 governorship, Orji told us during our visit that a 1991 document signed by the founding fathers of Abia State declared that there would be a "sharing of State government and political offices among the factions" of Abia State to ensure that "everybody is carried along and everybody feels that they are part of the government." Abaribe, himself from the Ukwa-Ngwa ethnic group that has long complained about its marginalization in contravention of the 1991 agreement, recently left the PDP to join the All Nigerian Peoples' Party (ANPP). At the recent ANPP convention in the capital city of Abuja, Abaribe was tapped to be the party's candidate for Governor of Abia.

10. (C) Comment. In late November, 47 Igbo traditional rulers met to try to dispel tension and conflict in Abia and other areas of the Southeast. They urged citizens of Abia to back Governor Kalu for the good of the Igbo people. Abaribe, however, being of another clan, felt no special responsibility to Kalu and decided to change parties and challenge his boss and former friend. High-level backers he may have cultivated in the PDP are gone, first because

Abaribe changed parties and, second, because these backers must support whomever the President and leader of their party supports. That would be incumbent Governor Kalu. ConGen FSNs from Abia, say that while many in the State admire Abaribe as an honorable and principled young man, almost no one gives him any chance at beating Kalu. As Obasanjo indicated support for any incumbent governor who wants to try for a second term, and Kalu still apparently enjoys significant voter support in the region, it is likely that he will be re-elected. Although none of the officials we spoke to specifically mentioned the possibility that the lingering ill-will among Kalu, Abaribe and some State legislators would engender election-related violence, Abaribe still travels with an armed escort, and he and Kalu are still not at all "reconciled."

HINSON-JONES